

THE OLD WOMAN DISCOVERED

Tenth Diversion of the First Day

The King of Roccaforte is enamoured by the voice of an old woman; is deceived by a finger, and goeth to bed with her; but discovering the deceit, commandeth his servants to throw her out of window, and in falling she remaineth hanging on a tree. Seven fairies sighting her they give her a charm, and she becometh a beautiful girl, and the king taketh her to wife; the other sister being envious of her good fortune, and wishing to be made handsome also, desireth to be flayed alive, and in so doing dies.

ALL HEARERS were pleased with Ciommetella's story, and were delighted to hear of Canneloro's safety, and the ghul's punishment for such deeds of cruelty. Then Prince Thaddeus signed for all to be silent, and commanded Ghiacova to seal with her recital this letter of entertainment, when thus she began:

The accursed vanity born with us women is our besetting vice, and through the great longing to seem beautiful and adorn the brow we spoil our faces; to whiten our skin we mar the whiteness of our teeth; and to give light to the limbs we darken our sight; and thus we pay the tribute to Time before the hour, enfeebling the eyesight, lining the face, and withering the skin. If a young girl deserveth blame for such emptiness, how much more so an old woman, who,

eager to seem young, becometh the laughing stock of all beholders and the ruin of herself: as I will relate to you if ye lend me an ear.

In a garden, opposite the king's palace in Roccaforte city, were sitting two old women, who were the most hideous creatures that could be seen. They had dishevelled hair, and wrinkled brow, and crooked stiff eyebrows, eyes red and watery, yellow skins full of wrinkles, large and crooked mouths, and hairy breasts. They were hunchbacked, with shrivelled arms, and were lame, and cloven footed; and so that the sun should not light upon that ugly-looking sight, they were hidden under the trees near one of the windows of the king. And it had come to this, that he could not even fart but that these two would talk and observe his doings; sometimes saying, that a jasmine had fallen upon their heads, and had given them an headache; another time, that a letter had fallen upon their shoulders and disturbed them; and at another, that the dust had suffocated them.

Now the king, listening to this talk, supposed that under him must be the quintessence of beauty, and the first cut of flowers, and the sweetest of all sweetness: and thus thinking, he longed with excessive longing to behold these hidden beauties, and to be enlightened upon their charms: therefore he began to sigh with deep sighs, and cough without a cold, and lastly to speak softly, saying, 'Where, where art thou hidden, thou most precious jewel? Come forth, O thou, the most beauteous in the world! Arise, thou sun! Come forth, thou gem worthy an emperor! Make manifest thy graces, let me behold the beaming lights which kindle fire in love's domain! Chase from thee, O thou accursed bench, this flower of beauty: be not so ware of thy excellencies: open the gate to a poor falcon, and cage me if thou wilt! Let me behold the mouth from whose lips these sounds come forth: let me behold the bell whose sound I hear: let me behold this bird whose sweet song I listen to; do not leave me as a sheep from Ponto to be fed with cresses, do not deny me the joy to behold and contemplate thy beauteous form.' These and other words did the king say, but he could ring gloria, the old women's ears were deaf to his prayers, and it was like adding fuel to the fire.

And the king burned with the heat of desire, and his thoughts were held ensnared by a form created in his own mind, and his heart was enslaved by amorous longing, and he fain would have found the key that could open the casket where this priceless gem was hidden, that caused him to die in despair; but nothing daunted at the silence which

followed his sighs and petitions, he continued to beseech and pray, never ceasing until one day of the days the old women, having become proud, gave themselves airs, through the flattering speeches of the king, and took counsel each with the other, so as not to let this opportunity escape them to catch this fine bird, who of his own accord came to throw himself into the snare. Therefore one day when the king, according to his wont, made sweet speeches from the window they spake to him through the trees with a sweet whispering voice, that the greatest favour that they could confer upon him was to show him in eight days' time one finger of one hand.

The king, being an expert soldier, knew that fortresses are taken inch by inch, and therefore refused not the offer, hoping thus to win step by step his will of this strong place which he besieged unceasingly; knowing the old adage, 'Take first and ask afterwards.' He accepted the peremptory terms and awaited the eight days, desiring to behold this eighth marvel of the world.

Meanwhile the old women all this time did naught else but trim and anoint their fingers, so that when the appointed time should arrive she whose finger was smoothest and finest, should hold it for inspection to the king; and he, impatiently waiting, counted the days, dragged on the nights, weighed the hours, measured the moments, noted the points, and examined carefully the atoms that should elapse till the longed for good should be vouchsafed to him, beseeching the sun to shorten his ways through the heavenly fields, so that he should sooner reach the end of his daily route and water his fiery steeds, tired of their long journey. And he adjured the night to chase away all darkness, and let him gaze on the light that, yet not seen, made him burn in a furnace of love; and he apostrophized Time, saying that he walked on crutches, and had put on leaden boots to spite him, so that the hour should not arrive so quickly in which their obligation should be fulfilled. But the time came at last, and the king descended to the garden, and knocked at the gate, and said, 'Come, come!' And one of the old women, the oldest and ugliest, seeing that her finger was the finest and smoothest, put it through the key-hole, and showed it to the king. For him, this was not a finger but a pointed dart, which struck his heart with deadly aim: 'twas not a dart, but a mace that struck his head with fiercest blow: but what do I say? Dart and mace? It was a lighted match to his desires, which took fire and burned with fiercest flames: but what am I saying? Dart and mace, and match? It was a thorn unto his thoughts, which cost him a thousand sighs;

and holding the hand, and kissing that finger, that from a wood-cutter's scraper had become a gilder's burnisher, he began saying, 'O sweet bow of love, O receptacle of all joys, O register of all love's privileges, for which I have become a warehouse of sorrow, and a magazine of anguish, and a custom-house of torments: is it possible, that thou wilt remain so hardened, and cruel, and feel no compassion of my complaints? O my sweetheart, if thou hast shown me the tail by the key-hole, put there thy lips, and we will have a jelly of happiness; if thou hast shown part of thy sweetmeats, O thou river of beauty, let me behold all thy body, let me behold those eyes of hawk peregrine, and let them wither and scorch mine heart with their leven glances. Who holdeth prisoner the treasure of thy beauteous face; who keepeth this beauteous ship in quarantine; by whose power is held prisoner this charming and graceful gazelle in a pig-stye? Come out of that pit; issue forth from those stables, come out of that hole; leap, sweet May, and give thine hand to Cola, and pay me what I am worth; thou knowest that I am the king, I am not a cucumber, I can bid and forbid: but that false and blind son of the lame Vulcan and the strumpet Venus, who hath full authority over all sceptres, hath made me thy subject, so that I beg of thee that of which I could command the gift; and I do as the old saw saith, for "with caresses and not with talk is Venus won."'

The old woman, who well knew where the devil kept his tail, an old fox, a decrepit cat, an old crow, a superannuated owl, thinking that, when your superior begs of you something, it is a command, and that the disobedience of a liege rouseth the wrath of the master, which may bring ruin, in a voice like a flayed cat's said, 'O my lord, as thou art willing to submit thyself to one that is beneath thee, an thou hast deigned descend from the sceptre to the spinning-wheel, from the royal hall to the stable, from pomp and luxury to the petticoats, from grandeur to misery, from the belvedere to the cellar, from the steed to the ass, I cannot, and I must not, and I will not contradict the will of so great a king; therefore as it is your desire to tie this knot between prince and liege, this binding of ivory with wood of a poplar-tree, this setting of diamonds with glass, I am ready to do thy will, but I must beseech thee to grant me, as a sign of thine affection, what I will beg of thee, and that is, that I may be received in thy bed at night without a candle, because I could not bear to be seen naked.'

The king, joying with exceeding gladness, sware an oath, laying hand upon hand, that he would grant her request willingly. And

giving a kiss sweet as sugar to a mouth stinking like assafoetida, he went his ways, and the time seemed longsome to him till the sun, tired of ploughing heaven's fields, before sowing the stars went to repose, and he thought of naught but the field he would plough and the seed he would sow, the joyance by hundredweights and the happiness by tons. But when the night darkened, and all marauders issued forth to empty the pockets of the wayfarers, and ease them of their cloaks, the old woman, conducted by one of the king's valets, came in the gloom, covered from head to foot with a thick veil looped up behind. And reaching the king's bedchamber, she unrobed at once, and went into bed.

The king, who had waited like match near a powder-cask, when he heard them coming, and heard her get into bed, perfuming his person with sweet scented musk and civet, and anointing his beard with perfumed ointment, jumped into bed. And it was well for the old woman that he was thus anointed and perfumed, so that he could not smell the stink of her mouth, and the vinegar of her arm-pits, and the mustiness of that ugly thing. But as soon as he felt her limbs, he perceived the deception; he felt her bottom and found it fleshless, the limbs thin and withered, and the breasts as empty bladders; and he marvelled with exceeding marvel, but kept silence, so as to be better assured of the case; and forced himself to do that for which he had no more desire, and entered this pig-stye whilst he believed he would enter the coast of Posillaco; and sailed with a fishing-smack, when he believed himself on board a galley.

But when sleep overtook the old woman, the king drew out from an ebony casket inlaid with silver a leathern bag, and out of it a small lanthorn which he lit, and made a perquisition under the bed-linen, and beheld an harpy instead of a nymph, a fury instead of a grace, Medusa instead of Venus. And at the sight he was wroth with exceeding wrath, and he had a mind to cut the rope which held this ship. And foaming at the mouth with rage, he cried aloud and called all his household, and when the servants heard the king's outcries they hardly stopped to don their shirts, but ran to his help, and said he to them, 'Behold, what trick hath this witch of Satan played me! Thinking I had a suckling-lamb, I find an old buffalo; believing I held in hand a dove, I find an owl; supposing I was enjoying a mouthful worth a king, I find between mine hands this filthy morsel, sickening to taste; but this, and worse, deserveth he who buyeth the cat inside the bag. But she hath vexed me beyond measure, and she will do

just penance, therefore take her up as she is, and throw her out of the window'; which command hearing, the old woman began to defend herself, kicking, and plunging, and biting, and saying, 'I appeal against this sentence: thou wouldest that I came to thy bed, and I will bring an hundred doctors to my defence,' and she spake the proverbs, 'An old fowl maketh good soup'; and 'Whoso leaveth the old way for the new findeth worse will ensue'; but with all this talk she was lifted up by the servants and thrown out of window, and that was her fortune. She fell, and being hung by the hair of her head on the bough of a fig-tree, remained hanging there without breaking her neck.

Now at early dawn some fairies passed through that garden, and being sad-hearted, having had some great sorrow to bear, for some time had neither spoken nor smiled; but perceiving that hideous shadow hanging on the tree, they all laughed till they fell backward, and putting their tongue in motion, they never ended talking about this spectacle they beheld. And to repay the old woman for the enjoyment she had caused them, they each and all gave her a charm. The first said, 'Mayest thou become young'; another, 'Mayest thou become beautiful'; another, 'Mayest thou be rich'; the next, 'Mayest thou be noble'; and another, 'Mayest thou be virtuous'; and the next, 'May all folk love thee'; and the last, 'Be thine all good fortune.' And when they ended their saying they departed, and the old woman found herself seated on a velvet chair with fringe of golden threads under that same tree, which had become a green velvet canopy purflewed with gold. Her face was as the face of a young girl, just fifteen, so beauteous that all other beauties would seem like old slippers near satin shoes: compared to this grace sitting on that velvet chair, the three Graces would seem as old iron; and if she would but smile and talk and glance, all others would play a losing game beside her. And she was decked and arrayed in costly raiments all purflewed with gems and gold, and the flowers that adorned her scented the air with their perfume, and pages and servants and handmaidens surrounded her, and she looked every inch a queen.

In the meanwhile the king, wrapping himself up in a blanket, and putting on a pair of light shoes, looked out of window to see what had happened to the old woman, and beholding a sight so marvellous and unexpected, he remained with mouth wide open, and gazed upon this beauty as one charmed, admiring first the golden hair falling lightly upon the white shoulders, and the curls tied with a golden

cord, whose sheen would put to shame the sun's rays; then the pencilled brows, like bows whose darts pierced the heart; and those eyes whose leven glance caused him a thousand sighs; and the sweet mouth, full of love's witchery, where all graces sat enthroned; and he gazed at the jewels and the robes, and he was beside himself, and murmured to himself, 'Am I sleeping, or waking? am I in my right senses, or am I mad? do I know or do I not know whence came this ball to strike me in such manner which maddens me? I must be a senseless spindle if I do not find out all about this marvel. How hath this sun appeared? how did this flower open? whence did this bird come hither, to draw by magnet all my desires? what ship hath brought her to this country? which cloud rained her down? This fountain of beauty hath brought me a sea of trouble!'

And speaking thus he ran down the steps into the garden, and went where the made-young old woman sat, and throwing himself at her feet, said to her, 'O dove-faced mine, O thou graceful doll, O thou pigeon from Venus' car, triumph of love, thou hast put this heart in soak in the river Sarno. If thine eyes are not blinded by the cane-seed, and thine ears deafened by the excrement of Rennena, thou wilt hear and perceive the love-longing and pain, the anguish and sore distress that I endure for thy beauty's sake; and if thou dost not believe, at the yellowing of my face, the heat which boileth in this breast; if thou believest not the flames of sighs, and the scorching fire which burneth in my veins; thou who art of good understanding, and judgment, thou canst comprehend how thy golden hair bindeth me like a chain, from thy dark eyes what coal burneth me, and from thy red lips like Cupid's bow, what darts strike me: therefore shut not the gate of pity, and draw not up the bridge of mercy, and dry not up the rill of compassion: and if thou do not believe me worthy to possess thy beauteous form, at least give me a safeguard of good words, a guide in a promise, and a deed of expecting hope, an if thou dost not, I will die and thou wilt lose the form.' These and other words did the king utter from the depth of his heart, which touched the made-young old woman, and at last she accepted him for her husband. And then she arose and he took her by the hand, and they went together in the royal palace, and he commanded them to get ready a banquet, and invited all the nobles of the country.

Now the old bride would have her sister there, but the messengers had great difficulty in finding her, and she was sadly afraid and would not go. She had been hiding carefully, but at last they prevailed upon

her to go, and she went, and now was seated by her sister's side, and it was long ere she knew her, and when at last she did know her, they joyed together with exceeding gladness. But the old woman could not eat, because other hunger consumed her entrails. Her heart was bursting with envy in sighting the youth and beauty of her sister, and every now and then she pulled her by the sleeve, saying, 'How hast thou done it, how hast thou done it, O my sister? Blessed art thou within those bonds.' And her sister answered, 'Eat now thy sufficiency, we will converse afterwards.' And the king enquired what she wanted, and the bride answered that her sister desired some green sauce, and the king sent at once for garlic sauce, peppered mustard, and a thousand other appetizing sauces to tickle the appetite. But to the old woman all kinds of sauces seemed bitter as gall, and again she pulled her sister's sleeve, saying, 'How didst thou do it, O sister mine, how didst thou do it? as I wish to do the like under the mantle'; and the sister answered, 'Be silent, we will have more time than money, eat now, and I will help thee, and we will speak afterwards.' And the king, being curious, asked what she wanted, and the bride was perplexed, and felt like a chick among the straw, and would have liked to be let alone from that nuisance, and answered that her sister wanted some sweetmeats, and the king sent for some pastry, and blanc-mange, and other sweetmeats raining from the heavens in great quantities. But the old woman could not rest, and again sang to the same tune, and the bride unable to bear her persistency any longer answered, 'I made them flay me, O my sister.' And the envious sister hearing these words said to herself, 'Go thy ways, thou hast not spoken to deaf ears; I will also tempt Fortune, and a courageous spirit perchance winneth, and if I succeed, thou wilt not be alone in thy enjoyment, as I also will require my share.' And thus saying, feigning to leave the table on some necessary requirement, she went to a barber's shop, where finding the master, she took him apart, and said to him, 'Here thou hast fifty ducats, if thou wilt flay me from head to foot.'

The barber, believing her to be mad, answered, 'Go thy ways, O my sister, thou speakest oddly, and surely thou wilt find some company very shortly.'

And the old woman, with a brazen face, replied, 'Mad thou art, as thou knowest not thy luck when it cometh to thee; because besides the fifty ducats, if my attempt be successful, I will make thee barber to Fortune herself; therefore do as I bid thee, tarry not, as this will be

thy fortune.' The barber contradicted, quarrelled, snapped, and protested for a long while, and at last feeling himself pulled by the nose, did as the proverb saith, 'Tether the master where the ass willeth,' and making her take a seat upon a bench, began to flay her, and the blood rained down, but she firm as adamant, now and again said, 'Ugh, who beauteous wisheth to be, with anguish and pain must troubled be!' and the barber continued his work and she continued her say, till at last the barber reached the navel, when her strength failed her, and giving vent to a strong fart in sign of departure, she proved at her own risk Sannazaro's verse:

'Envy, O my son, her flesh doth rend.'

This story ended, and it wanting an hour yet to sunset, Prince Thaddeus sent for Fabiello and Jacovuccio, the one Master of the Robes, and the other House Steward, and desired them to give a dessert to this furnished table of entertainments; and they were ready as serjeants, the one dressed in tights, and surtout bell-fashion with large brass buttons, and a flat cap drawn over the ears; the other with a long cap, surtout with breastplate, and trousers as a spider's legs. And they came forth from behind a myrtle-bush, just as if they were on the stage acting a scene, and spake thus: